

Contracting the Adversary

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With the military services looking to alleviate shortages of pilots and publicly admitting shortages in readiness, the Navy and Air Force have begun to look to contracting out some kinds of pilot training—specifically the live simulation of enemy aircraft.

Before the Vietnam War, American air forces trained internally, with pilots flying against others in similar aircraft using the same tactics. During that war, however, the United States learned a great deal about modern adversary tactics and the capabilities of the (mainly Soviet) aircraft employed in that war, which often differed markedly from what had been experienced in prewar training. To spread those lessons and train pilots more realistically, the U.S. Air Force and Navy began formal programs of Dissimilar Air Combat Training, or DACT.

DACT pilots were trained in adversary tactics of the time, and flew U.S. aircraft that most resembled expected adversaries in performance, [painted in foreign camouflage](#) to provide a more realistic image. Under [then-classified](#) programs, the Air Force also [acquired actual foreign aircraft](#) to better determine their characteristics.

The Air Force established Aggressor squadrons that participated in large exercises and toured fighter bases to provide realistic opposition during training rotations. The Navy created adversary forces that flew as opposition to pilots going through the TOPGUN senior fighter school. Those programs continue to the present day.

As global air forces modernized over the past two decades, the wide availability of surplus third- and [fourth-generation](#) fighter aircraft and high-performance jet trainers led to the establishment of private companies providing “adversary air” on a contract basis. Firms such as [Draken International](#), [TopACES](#), [Discovery Air](#), [Tactical Air Support](#), and [ATAC](#) initially provided services to [foreign air forces](#) whose smaller fleets did not permit establishing their own dedicated adversary forces.

Subsequently, the [U.S. Navy](#) and, later, the [Air Force](#) have experimented with contract adversary air. Such services offer U.S. pilots the opportunity to fly against a diversity of aircraft types without the overhead and expense required to maintain a fleet of planes not otherwise in inventory. Particularly in the case of the Air Force, which has increasingly publicized a [shortage of pilots](#), using contractors to provide adversary air may free up experienced uniformed pilots for other duties.

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(There is some precedent for such things; the U.S. Navy has also experimented with contract aerial refueling services. Many foreign air forces, [including Britain](#), have given up or significantly curtailed their own refueling operations in favor of contractors.)

A move to contract out adversary air operations may present potential drawbacks. The cost of contracting all such operations for the Air Force is estimated at [\\$400 million](#) a year. Operation of DACT units yields a cadre of experienced pilots thoroughly versed in adversary operations, who can be significant assets to other units in times of conflict; contracting out such services could result in a loss of that knowledge, or at least make it harder to employ in wartime. U.S. DACT units benefit from the latest intelligence on potential adversaries; it is not clear that this knowledge could be shared with contractors. Also, increasing the use of contracted adversary air operations could increase the competition for experienced pilots, which is one of the factors in the current Air Force pilot shortage.

A broader issue is whether military training should be considered an inherently governmental function, part of a [long-standing debate](#) that government has [addressed previously](#). In addition, some of the major potential contractors have significant foreign ownership and/or are headquartered in foreign countries; several use foreign-made aircraft, although it might be argued that this is part of the point of dissimilar training.

Given that the U.S. military has already experimented with such services, and that Air Force leaders have been speaking publicly about the prospect, these issues may arise in consideration of the FY2019 defense budget, with submission expected in February.

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